CHAPTER 37.

WRITING PROGRAMS WORLDWIDE: PROFILE OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF SHARJAH (AUS)

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The American University of Sharjah (AUS) is a primarily undergraduate institution located in the emirate of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, and accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. AUS is an English-medium, co-educational, and culturally-diverse university that employs a traditional (US model) writing curriculum with a freshman writing sequence and a second-year English course dedicated to the communication needs of a field. Due mostly to a lack of exposure to writing in secondary school, many AUS students face steep learning curves as they try to meet the expectations of their writing courses and of the writing assignments in other discipline courses. Supplementing writing instruction are a well-established undergraduate-staffed Writing Center and a growing Writing Fellows program. As AUS undertakes initiatives to develop its role in the region, the need for greater attention to developing student writing is being highlighted.

Sheikh Dr. Sultan has articulated the principal values that should define the identity of AUS:

- Science and education must regain their rightful place in the advancement of our society and in shaping the lives of our children.
- The purpose of higher education is to reshape the minds of our youth in order for them to address personal and social challenges using the scientific method.
- AUS must be a center of research for solving the problems faced by society.
- AUS will have the autonomy and freedom needed to flourish as an independent university.

- AUS must be organically linked with the economic, cultural and industrial sectors of society in productive cooperation (Vision of the Founder, 2010)

AUS is a primarily undergraduate institution, with only 6% of enrolled students in graduate programs. In spring 2010, 4,742 undergraduates were enrolled: 43% in the College of Engineering; 30% in the School of Business and Management; 16% in the College of Arts and Sciences; and 11% in the College of Architecture and Design. During the spring 2010 semester, AUS faculty, staff, students, and alumni were asked to rank descriptive words in order to aptly describe AUS. Among the top-five ranked descriptors was "culturally diverse" (Chancellor's Snapshot, May 2010). Indeed, according to the AUS Institutional Research office, the top ten student nationalities of the 80 student nationalities represented during spring 2010 were Emirati (citizens of the UAE), Jordanian, Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian, Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, Saudi Arabian, and Lebanese. Faculty members represented 49 nationalities (Fast Facts, Spring 2010).

This cultural diversity does not simply define AUS but can be noted throughout the United Arab Emirates. Sharjah, the emirate in which AUS is located, is one of the seven emirates comprising the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a largely coastal country situated on the Arabian Peninsula between Saudi Arabia and Oman. Once known as the Trucial States, the UAE gained independence from England and achieved nationhood in 1971. At that time, due to the small number of Emiratis, the government began to hire an international labor force to help create an infrastructure that would sustain the rapidly modernizing country. The workforce remains largely international, and English works as a lingua franca in the UAE. In fact, while students have the option of Arabic-medium and English-medium primary and secondary schools, all postsecondary institutions in the UAE are English-medium.

Sharjah, once known primarily for its ports and seafaring economy, receives revenues from oil and natural gas. More recently renowned for its emphasis on culture and learning, Sharjah was designated the Cultural Capital of the Arab World by UNESCO in 1998. The emirate contains a number of universities, museums, galleries, theatres, and restored heritage areas—a "context [that] facilitates the [AUS]'s intention to be an academic center at the intersection of ancient cultural traditions and contemporary intellectual currents" (About Sharjah, 2010).

LITERACY AND WRITING

As a university that is based on the American model, the concern for literacy focuses most specifically on English. However, as a university in the heart of

the Arab world where the student body is 70% Arab, there are opportunities to study Arabic and learn about Arab heritage. An Arabic Heritage course, which can be taken in Arabic or in English, is a general education requirement for all AUS students. Also, the Department of Arabic and Translation Studies offers minors in Arabic language and literature and in English/Arabic translation, as well as a Master of Arts degree in English/Arabic translation. In general, despite the multicultural nature of our faculty and the fact that many speak Arabic as a first language, AUS faculty members publish in English. This certainly can be attributed to the effect of global English on academia; there are very few internationally recognized journals in languages other than English. At AUS, like most American universities, decisions about contract renewal and promotion revolve around publication in such journals.

While there are AUS students who engage in writing with a sense of pleasure and take advantage of the usual university venues for writing, such as the AUS literary magazine, student newspaper, and the annual Writing Center-sponsored writing contest, there are many students who are apprehensive of writing. There appears to be a variety of reasons for this trepidation; the most immediately recognizable is the lack of attention given to writing in their pre-collegiate schooling. Certainly, students from Arabic-medium schools often have weak writing skills due to their lack of exposure to English. Yet, many AUS students, even those educated in English-medium schools, begin their freshman year without basic skills in (1) structure (i.e., thesis statement, topic sentences, and transitions), (2) argumentation, and (3) source-based citation. Many do not completely understand the notion of plagiarism and have not assimilated the norms of intellectual ownership expected at an American-style university.

There appear to be a number of factors influencing this latter condition. It is understood that many regional secondary schools emphasize rote learning, which results in practices such as providing written essay models for students to memorize and re-write for evaluation purposes (Ronesi, 2009). Moreover, many students report receiving very few writing assignments in their pre-collegiate schooling and claim they were not taught the conventions associated with intellectual property. Another important factor is the collectivist nature of our students' societies. Collectivistic cultures, such as those in Arab countries, value collaboration and support through established networks over the more individualistic approach professed by North American society (McCabe, Feghali, & Abdallah, 2008). Subsequently, it is understandable that AUS students enjoy helping family and friends succeed and find it quite normal to ask for such help. As such, AUS students must learn to make a distinction between "helping behaviors" that truly help their peers (i.e., help-

ing a friend brainstorm ideas for an essay or quizzing each other on the main ideas of a reading) and those behaviors that simply enable bad habits and lack of learning (i.e., writing an essay for a roommate who is under time pressure, or providing a friend homework answers). As new students grapple with assimilating all of the new concepts they encounter, they feel that writing at the university level is a monumental task.

Indeed, many AUS students face an extremely steep learning curve as they try to meet the expectations of their freshman writing courses and of the writing assignments in first-year discipline courses. Not surprisingly, with all the cognitive, social, and emotional demands on them, many students cannot reach academic standards for writing even after a couple of semesters. So, to many AUS students, writing engenders discomfort and a sense of inadequacy.

AUS follows a traditional US-model writing curriculum, with a freshman writing sequence (covering a continuum from basic writing to argumentation to research) and a required second-year English course dedicated to the general communication needs of a field (e.g., English for Engineers, Writing for Business). The freshman-year sequence includes four courses, and in all of them the development of critical thinking skills is emphasized: WRI 001 is a developmental course devoted to academic reading and writing, contextualized grammar instruction, goal setting, time management, and study skills; WRI 101 addresses reading and writing strategies through class discussion and formal and informal writing assignments; WRI 102 focuses on active reading, and intensifies critical thinking and analytical writing; and ENG 204 is devoted to the construction of an argumentative research paper (Undergraduate Course Descriptions, 2010). These courses comprise most of a 12-credit (four course) General Education requirement for English Language Competency and all emphasize the writing process with peer-review and multiple drafts.

A number of approaches have influenced the development of our writing courses. Professor Alaanoud Abusalim, Associate Director of Writing Studies and Curriculum Coordinator, notes that our curriculum and pedagogy draw mostly on the following: the cognitive school (Flower, 1994; Hairston, 1982, 1994) with a process approach and focus on meta-cognitive work; the expressive school (Elbow, 1998; Murray,1985) with an emphasis on free-writing, journals, and discussion boards in an attempt to help students locate their voice; and the social construction school (Berlin, 1996; Bizzell, 1992) which has shaped our understanding of the cognitive, socioeconomic, and cultural challenges our students face in becoming members of the academic discourse community (personal communication, June 25, 2010).

Over the years, the goals of the English Language Competency courses have been re-aligned periodically to suit the steadily increasing proficiency of more recent enrollees and to insure smooth flow between the courses. Placement exams prior to a student's first semester determine at which level the student begins. Most students are placed in WRI 101; for example, a typical student majoring in Economics might place into WRI 101 followed by WRI 102, ENG 204, and ENG 225 (Writing for Business). However, it is possible—though rare—for very strong students to be placed in WRI 102 in their first semester of their freshman year and to complete ENG 204 in their second semester. After that, what and how much a student writes is determined by the discipline a student chooses as a major and the pedagogical beliefs of the various professors the student encounters. Accordingly, students who major (or even minor) in International Studies report writing not only often but also critically and analytically. Yet, there are some majors in which students report relatively few writing assignments. However, it is not unusual that, within departments where students are not asked to write much, there may be a professor or two who bucks the trend and requires writing. Some professors believe strongly—often because of their own experiences—that writing is extremely important to the learning process, even as they admit that requiring writing in their classes is time-consuming and laborious. On the other hand, some professors express that other means of assessing student learning, such as multiple choice questions, are fairer to our students due to the potential for cheating or plagiarizing in writing assignments. There is also the argument that poor writing skills may hinder students from demonstrating their knowledge. Of course, this last argument highlights the need for providing AUS students more curricular opportunities to develop their writing if they are to graduate on an even par with cohorts in the US

WRITING ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY

While AUS has not instituted an official Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) program to support writing across the university, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) has generously supported the WAC endeavors of the Department of Writing Studies (DWS). In 2004, an undergraduate-staffed Writing Center was established; it has been growing steadily and now has a main location in the library and a satellite in the Language Building. The Writing Center is a dynamic hub which, in addition to providing session-based writing support on assignments, arranges workshops on various writing issues

(e.g., rhetorical appeals, identifying logical fallacies, APA referencing), classroom visits by tutors to explain the Writing Center, and class presentations geared to specific aspects of writing as requested by professors. It has grown steadily and is well-utilized especially by students taking writing and English courses, but also increasingly by students in other courses. To expand Writing Center practice throughout the university and especially into classes that had not traditionally placed much emphasis on writing, DWS began running a Writing Fellows program in fall 2007. In conjunction, a training course for all undergraduate peer-tutors of writing was established with the goal of creating a coterie of students who could work in either capacity—Writing Fellow or Writing Center tutor—or as both simultaneously. This training course has become part of AUS curriculum and fulfills three credits of the 12-credit General Education requirement for English Language Competency mentioned earlier.

The Writing Center and the Writing Fellows Program are run by two different faculty members from the Department of Writing Studies. As the Writing Fellows Program director also recruits for and teaches the peer-tutoring class, the two professors work closely; in fact, the Writing Center and Writing Fellows program share tutors. During the course of an academic year, both professors are approached by colleagues from a variety of disciplines with questions about course-based writing (usually assignment development or assessment approaches) and for information on the types of support their particular tutors could lend. As AUS is not very large, word of mouth is a fairly effective means of promoting the programs, although both promote their services in fairly traditional ways: websites, e-mail reminders to faculty and students, posters, faculty newsletter articles, and occasionally AUS-based presentations. In February 2011, both professors were co-chairs for the second annual Middle East-North African Writing Center Association (MENAWCA) 2011 Conference held at AUS. This event not only provided more than 200 professors and students across the region a venue for discussion and learning, but also enlightened AUS about its own WAC endeavors.

It is fair to say there is interest and concern at many levels—from administration to faculty to students—about insuring that students have more curricular opportunities to develop their writing. From my vantage point, it is hard to determine what official route that interest and concern might take. AUS's relatively new and dynamic chancellor has begun to underscore the need for developing more of a research culture at the university, particularly locally-oriented research, and research that enhances the undergraduate experience. In addition, there has been a great deal of self-study at AUS with regard to promoting a culture of academic integrity. To the extent that I have been involved, discussions

on both these topics serve to highlight the issue of writing at the university, and future developments in that area seem possible.

THE TEACHING OF WRITING: IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

There is a strong feeling among those of us who teach writing at AUS that the nature of our courses contributes a great deal to the success of the AUS student. In learning to write, so much else is accomplished. In many cases, we writing professors provide our students' first exposure to employing critical thought to their learning and communication, as we ask them to evaluate their understandings and assumptions in light of a scholarly approach or of multiple perspectives. We introduce students to academic integrity and intellectual property issues and ask them to incorporate these notions into all their future accomplishments. In our capacities as writing professors, we individualize their learning, responding to their needs as writers, as students, as multicultural individuals learning to express their perspectives in a sensitive, principled, and scholarly way. Not only do we affect the learning of AUS students with limited or average proficiency in writing, but we also offer challenge and growth to many of our stronger writers, who, as peer tutors, grow as writers and individuals through their service to the AUS community.

Daily events corroborate the sense that the required AUS English Language courses and additional WAC endeavors play a pivotal part in our student's academic and personal growth. The following personal experiences come to mind: a chat with a Department of Writing Studies (DWS) colleague in which I learned that a strong writer and motivated student in my current Peer Tutor training class started out in the developmental course, WRI 001, only three semesters before; the student who, at the beginning of the semester, fearfully doubted his capability to write an argumentative research paper in ENG 204, and ultimately wrote one of the very best in the class; a student in the same class who admitted that his initial strong beliefs about his research topic were toppled in the light of the research evidence he uncovered; a Writing Fellow's report that she escorted a shy student she was working with to the Writing Center to help her make a first appointment there; and the proliferation of zany and creative Writing Center posters created by the tutors, which clearly convey the enthusiasm they have for their work. Events like these suggest that those AUS professors and students involved in the craft of writing have made untold impact on the lives of students, and that not only writing-based learning but also a culture of writing is unfolding at AUS.

Frustrations are fewer, but, of course, they exist: the senior who has managed to postpone his writing sequence until his final year, and whose writing is terribly undeveloped in view of his looming graduation date and the start of his career; the colleague from another department who presents me with an upper-level student's atrociously written paper and states that Writing and English faculty are responsible; the students who give short shrift to writing courses because they feel it is a useless imposition. These are all "downers" encountered on occasion.

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF WRITING AT AUS

Early in the fall 2009 semester, the different departments of the university took a retreat day for strategic planning. My department—the Department of Writing Studies—unanimously felt that we needed to play a greater role in promoting literacy at AUS beyond the introductory courses discussed above. We decided in our retreat that we wanted to increase our repertoire of classes, expand our peer-tutoring programs, and create a minor in Rhetoric and Composition, all goals to which we have made strides over the past months. That departmental retreat was a truly empowering one that seems to have played a pivotal role in galvanizing our motivation and spirit. My sense is that, while writing education becomes more apparent through the above-mentioned departmental goals, other internal and external forces will take shape that highlight the need for attending more closely to developing student writing at AUS.

My hope is that this attention will highlight that writing is "organically linked with the economic, cultural and industrial sectors of society in productive cooperation" (Vision of the Founder, 2010), as part of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi's vision of an education that culminates in the culture of productivity in the United Arab Emirates.

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